

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Virginia's Education Reform Works

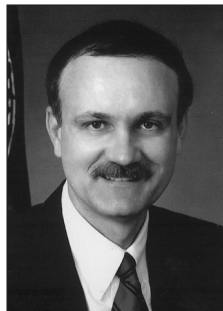
By Mark Christie

Nearly seven years ago, Virginia launched one of most sweeping reforms of public education in the state's history. Known as the Standards of Learning (SOL) program, the guiding vision of that reform is ambitious yet simple: To raise student achievement through accountability for results, so that all our school-children, not just a lucky few, will be prepared to compete successfully in the global economy of the 21st century, whether they go to college or enter the workforce right out of high school, and will be informed, responsible citizens of a democracy.

The reform consists of four components, linked by a compelling logic:

- The development of high, content-rich academic standards in grades K-12,
- The use of tests in grades 3, 5, 8 and high school to measure children's progress in learning the standards,

- The linkage of student achievement on the tests to school accreditation and graduation requirements,
- The reporting to parents and the public individual school performance on a broad range of indicators, from test results to school safety indicators, on the School Performance Report Card, issued annually.



Mark Christie

National Test Results Show Progress

There is increasing evidence that the SOL program is working exactly as intended, to raise student achievement for all demographic groups. The evidence includes not only improving student performance on our state SOL tests (see charts), but just as importantly, the results on national tests taken by Virginia students.

This August, the latest results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math tests were released. Known as



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the “Nation’s Report Card,” the NAEP tests let us see how today’s Virginia students are doing compared both to students in years past, as well as to students in other states. Virginia’s students had dramatic improvement in their performance on the 2000 math tests, compared to the previous 1996 and 1992 math tests.

How dramatic? Virginia’s fourth and eighth graders achieved bigger gains on the 2000 NAEP math tests than students in all but two other states in the country, compared to the 1996 results. Not coincidentally, 1996 was the year in which the SOL program was just getting underway, after years of declining student achievement on various indicators. Importantly, Virginia’s African-American and Hispanic students also demonstrated significant gains on the 2000 math tests.

Virginia students have also achieved three consecutive years of improving performance on the national Stanford 9 tests, given annually. Any one year’s test results are a snapshot, but results from multiple years’ testing showing clearly positive trends are undeniable evidence of progress.

Why Did Virginia Launch this Reform?

Given all the criticism from opponents of accountability, it is important to go back and review the reasons Virginia began this reform effort. The SOL program did not begin in a vacuum. There were two primary reasons: First, while many of our schoolchildren were doing quite well in our public schools, far too many others were falling through the cracks. Their lack of achievement was being covered up by social promotion and grade inflation, with the result that these students were left unprepared for success as adults in our economy and society.

Second, the 21st century will be characterized by a knowledge-based economy more

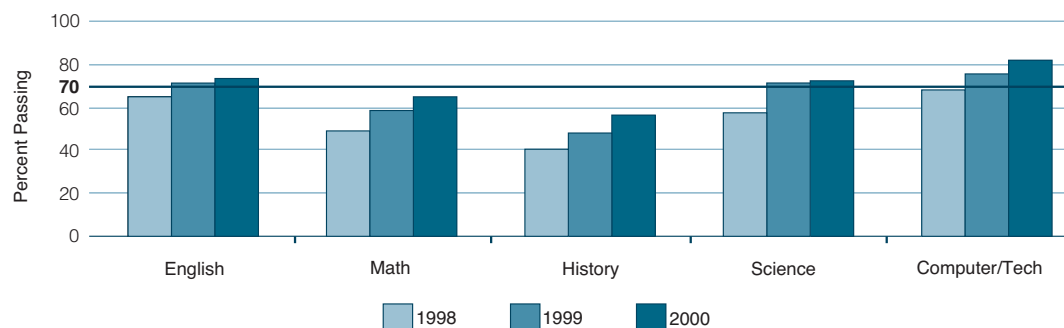
competitive than ever before in history. Consequently, all our students will need higher levels of skills and knowledge to get the good, well-paying jobs that will flow to those countries and states that have the best-educated workforces.

Virginia employers had complained for years about high school graduates who come to them for entry-level jobs lacking basic academic skills in reading, writing and math. Test data supported the employers’ complaints:

- The Literacy Passport Test (LPT) began in the late 1980s and was given to all Virginia sixth-graders for nearly a decade. Each year, approximately one in three sixth-graders failed to pass all three parts of the LPT, which tested the most rudimentary of skills in reading, writing and math. The failure rate for minority children was even worse. This abysmal failure rate showed no improvement whatsoever for a decade.
- In 1994, Virginia’s fourth-graders suffered *the single worst decline in the nation* on the NAEP reading tests.
- Throughout the 1990s, approximately one in four Virginia public high school graduates took required remedial work prior to taking college-level courses.

SOL critics generally prefer to ignore these facts about the pre-SOL status quo, and I do not cite them to engage in gratuitous criticism of the public schools. As a product of public schools myself who will always be grateful to my teachers for the good quality of the education I received, I know full well that public schools, unlike private schools, must take all students who show up at their doors, regardless of the income or educational levels of the parents, or physical, emotional or social pathologies that some students may bring with them. Many of our public schools are doing great jobs with our brighter kids, sending many of their graduates to some of the finest

Student Improvement on SOL Tests by Subject Area



universities in the nation where they compete successfully with the world's best. Other schools are doing heroic jobs educating children who face huge obstacles to success.

Yet too many children in our public schools, especially the poor and minorities, are not achieving at levels necessary for success in a global market economy. It is because the public schools must attempt to educate all children, because the role of the public schools is so important to our future social and economic success as a commonwealth, that we must insist upon a higher—and broader—level of achievement among all our students.

That is where the tests come in.

Now Results Count, Too.

The third component of our education reform, tying test results to accreditation and graduation, has drawn the most criticism. Critics often say, "It is unfair to base a school's accreditation solely on test scores or a student's diploma solely on passing a single test."

Virginia, however, is doing neither of those things with the SOL tests. For a school to be accredited, we require that many other criteria be met in addition to test scores; for example, minimum staff ratios, course offering requirements, and physical facility and safety requirements. To the many requirements for certain inputs, however, we have added an important requirement for certain outputs, in the form of student achievement as measured by SOL and other tests, such as Advanced Placement or SAT-2.

So the real issue at the very heart of the debate over school accreditation is this: Will actual student achievement, verified independently, also be a requirement for school accreditation? While few will admit it honestly, the critics do not want student achievement to be a requirement for school accreditation. We SOL supporters say that student achievement ought to be the most important requirement of all.

In addition, contrary to what the anti-SOL critics allege, no student will be denied a diploma based on failing a single SOL test. To earn a standard diploma, the student must accumulate 22 academic credits in coursework, and only 6 credits by passing SOL tests or other tests approved by the State Board of Education. In other words, teacher-evaluated classroom work represents slightly over three-fourths of the diploma requirements. We require that the student also pass at least six SOL tests to make sure that the student has, in reality, acquired a

minimum level of skills and knowledge in the core academic areas of reading, writing, math, science and history. No test is a "one bite at the apple" episode. Any student who fails an SOL test may retake it multiple times. If a student fails a reading test, for example, we want the school to give the student remedial help to improve the student's reading skills so that the student can pass the test on the second or third try.

The Tests Have Caused a New Focus on Student Achievement

SOL test scores have improved for four consecutive years, and even critics acknowledge that the public schools are focused on student instruction and achievement as never before. Typical was the comment I received from a public-school educator from Spotsylvania County who, while still skeptical about the SOL reform, conceded that in his 25 years as a Virginia public-school educator he had never seen so much time and effort being spent on student instruction and academic achievement.

The Standards of Accreditation eventually require a 70 percent pass rate on the SOL tests in the core academic disciplines to achieve full accreditation. Because of this, the schools must focus on raising achievement for the broadest possible range of children, including those who, before the program was in effect, were too often ignored and given social promotions from one grade level to the next until they were finally handed a diploma and sent out into the world unprepared to hold down a good job or function successfully in our society.

Can anyone seriously contend that this dramatically increased emphasis on student achievement would be taking place absent the tests and their consequences? Of course not. Because the tests are graded independently, they expose such practices as grade inflation and social promotion. There is undoubtedly a role for other types of school evaluations, but for accountability to work honestly and accurately, the assessments used for accountability must not be vulnerable to manipulation.

Some critics say the tests will not raise student achievement. Used alone, of course not—no one contends they will. It is the vastly increased emphasis by the schools on instruction and learning that the tests plus accountability have produced that will raise achievement levels across the board—including for many of those children who are capable of achieving but who have previously been written off as incapable.

The SOLs Do Not Lead To “Rote Memorization” or “Teaching to the Test”

Two of the favorite bumper-sticker slogans of the SOL critics are that the tests lead to “rote memorization” or “teaching to the test.” Both of these criticisms are intellectually vacuous. That they are heard so often from

professors at college-level schools of education is a sad commentary on the nearly monolithic hostility to content-rich academic standards and testing-based accountability that characterizes “ed-school” faculties.

The SOL tests in reading, writing and math measure whether a child has mastered the skills of reading, writing or math. To say

Virginia Standards of Learning Assessments • Improvement from 1998 - 2000 on SOL Tests

SOL Test	1998 Passing Rate (%)	1999 Passing Rate (%)	2000 Passing Rate (%)	Change from 1998 to 1999	Change from 1999 to 2000	Change from 1998 to 2000
Grade 3						
English	53	61	61	+8	0	+8
Mathematics	63	68	71	+5	+3	+8
History & Social Science	49	62	65	+13	+3	+16
Science	63	68	73	+5	+5	+10
Grade 5						
English: Reading, Literature, & Research	68	69	68	+1	-1	0
English: Writing	65	81	81	+16	0	+16
Mathematics	47	51	63	+4	+12	+16
History & Social Science	33	46	51	+13	+5	+18
Science	59	67	64	+8	-3	+5
Computer/Technology	72	81	85	+9	+4	+13
Grade 8						
English: Reading, Literature, & Research	64	67	70	+3	+3	+6
English: Writing	67	70	76	+3	+6	+9
Mathematics	53	60	61	+7	+1	+8
History & Social Science	35	40	50	+5	+10	+15
Science	71	78	82	+7	+4	+11
Computer/Technology	63	72	78	+9	+6	+15
High School						
English: Reading, Literature, & Research	72	75	78	+3	+3	+6
English: Writing	71	81	85	+10	+4	+14
Algebra I	40	56	65	+16	+9	+25
Algebra II	31	51	58	+20	+7	+27
Geometry	52	62	67	+10	+5	+15
Earth Science	58	65	70	+7	+5	+12
Biology	72	81	79	+9	-2	+7
Chemistry	54	64	64	+10	0	+10
World History I	62	68	75	+6	+7	+13
World History II	41	47	60	+6	+13	+19
World Geography	N/A	N/A	76	N/A	N/A	N/A
U.S. History	30	32	39	+2	+7	+9

that a teacher is “teaching to the test” when a teacher prepares a child for the SOL tests by teaching the child to read, write, add or subtract, is ridiculous. If teaching a child these essential skills is “teaching to the test,” then we should be grateful. One wonders what was being taught in English and math classes before the SOL tests if the tests have suddenly brought about “teaching to the test.” Given that for the decade before the SOLs one-third of our sixth-graders were regularly failing the literacy tests, it is now clear that many were not being taught how to read, write or do grade-level math.

By the same token, how is teaching children to read, write, or do math “rote memorization?” Is learning how to match a subject and verb “rote memorization?” Is teaching a child that 6 times 7 equals 42 “rote memorization?” Apparently in some education quarters, it is.

To be fair to the critics, while “teaching to the test” and “rote memorization” are not valid criticisms in the academic skill areas of reading, writing and math, they could be dangers in the areas of science and history. These areas are not skills, but represent bodies of knowledge. No doubt there are some teachers who have simply drilled students to memorize historical or scientific facts, but those are, to be frank, simply poor teaching practices. Good teachers can take a body of factual knowledge and teach it in interesting, creative ways.

What we have in Virginia at present in the areas of science and history is both: We have a lot of good teachers who are teaching the SOL content in history and science in exciting, interesting ways that both entertain and teach students. We also, unfortunately, have some teachers who are simply drilling students to memorize facts. The answer is not to drop the teaching and testing of science and history, but to insist that poor teachers adopt the good teaching practices that their colleagues are demonstrating all over Virginia.

As Salem Superintendent of Schools Wayne Tripp recently said in the *Roanoke Times* (8/8/01): “The standards can be met without compromising ... excellent, creative teaching ...”

The SOLs Are Working to Improve Public Education

The evidence that the SOL program is working grows daily. In addition to four years of rising SOL scores, we also have several years of rising student scores on national tests such as the Stanford 9 and NAEP. More schools than ever are meeting the state standards for student performance. While the Board of Education has repeatedly made—and will continue to make—reasonable adjustments, with the SOL program now clearly succeeding at its primary goal of raising student achievement, it would be a tragedy to retreat on the fundamental principles of accountability that are producing this success.

For nearly two centuries, our public schools have been the primary engine of opportunity for the vast majority of children. They have offered children not born into wealth or privilege the tools to fulfill the traditional American parents’ dream that their children shall have better lives than they did. That is what this reform is all about: Ensuring that all our public schoolchildren get the opportunity for a better future by giving them the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in a global economy and to be informed, responsible citizens of our commonwealth. •

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